

Advance Praise for *Seeing Ourselves*

“Carl E. James’s *Seeing Ourselves* remains a defining text for understanding race, ethnicity, and culture in Canada. This fifth edition extends its impact through a sustained engagement with student voices across generations, offering rare longitudinal insight into how identity and inequity are lived and reinterpreted over time. At a moment of renewed commitments to equity and persistent tensions, this collection is both timely and necessary. It invites critical, nuanced, and thoughtful engagement with the complexities of contemporary social life. An essential resource for educators, students, and scholars, and for anyone seeking deeper understanding of social justice in contemporary Canada.”

—LEANNE TAYLOR, associate professor, Brock University

“There has been a significant and critical focus on the broad field of cultural pluralism — including multiculturalism/interculturalism, antiracism, social justice and related conceptions — within Canadian scholarship over the past half century. Carl E. James has played a central role in elaborating on and illuminating the lived experiences of diverse people in Canadian society as well as the relations, institutions and policies that frame the meaning of diversity. In *Seeing Ourselves: Exploring Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*, which has stood the test of time in its 5th edition some 37 years after the first edition, James presents the personal and heartfelt narratives of a number of people who seek to better understand, problematize and deconstruct how their identities shape, and can be shaped by, the interplay with others, taking into account how power relations are integrated into our lived realities. The book skillfully presents a range of concepts, findings, and interpretations of diversity in Canada, and it does so in an engaging, enticing, and critical way. James helps sensitize us while cultivating the base from which we can also re-think our own agency and engagement in society, an exceptionally fundamental part of the education puzzle. This is a wonderful book!”

—PAUL R. CARR, professor, Université du Québec en Outaouais (UQO) & chair-holder, UNESCO Chair in Democracy, Global Citizenship and Transformative Education (DCMÉT)

“With a mature and astute underpinning, Carl E. James delivers an inclusive exploration of culture while emphasizing its complex and pervasive nature. Dr. James illuminates’ evolution, diversity, and the role of power and socialization in shaping cultural norms. In doing so, James pushes the reader into the nuances of Canadian culture, addressing its multicultural distinctiveness and the interplay of British, French, American, and Indigenous cultures.

Carl anchors text within a localized perspective while making it relevant within Canadian society and its multicultural core. Real-world paradigms, such as the evolution of technology, environmental changes, and societal shifts in attitudes toward gender and sexuality, engage readers. Overall, James suggests that culture is a dynamic and evolving force that shapes human behaviour and societal structures, while also highlighting the importance of recognizing and respecting cultural diversity. The reader will realize that both race and ethnicity are central to identity. James proves we are shaped by societal validation and that race is socially constructed, not biologically fixed, yet deeply embedded in societal structures.”

—THOMAS G. RYAN, professor, Faculty of Education, Nipissing University

Seeing Ourselves

Excerpt

Seeing Ourselves

Exploring Race, Ethnicity, and Culture

5th edition

Carl E. James



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*If I cannot see myself, I cannot see others clearly;
and if I cannot see others clearly,
seeing myself becomes more and more difficult.*

—Lynn, student, 1989

*Not everything that is faced can be changed,
but nothing can be changed until it is faced.*

—James Baldwin, 1962

*It's what we think we know already that often prevents us from
learning.*

— Claude Bernard, 19th-century French physiologist

*As hard as it may be to believe,
in Canadian society, issues of race and ethnicity are often ignored.
With so little acknowledgement of our diversity,
we will remain blind to our reality.*

—Kai James, 1994

Excerpt



Preface

Richerd: I came across this book in 2024–25 in my third-year university course Race and Diversity in Education, in which we explored the concepts of racialization, identity, and culture and the epistemological process of recognizing these concepts within the context of education. The book was our class text and, for the first time in my educational journey, I was able to put academic knowledge to my colloquial understandings of culture, race, and our social organization of identity. I feel like the book took me on a journey through time to understand both the historical and present-day implications of race, cultural hegemony, and privilege surrounding identity — a journey where I saw myself and, in a new way, saw others too. The personal stories really helped me to understand others through the lens that they used to relate their identity.

As a racialized person, I started to think about my identity through the constructs of race and the label of athlete with its assumed privilege, status marker, and discriminator that inexplicably link you to a community and a preconceived set of values and behaviours that are seemingly dictated by the physical and collaborative nature of your sport. However, this label is only bestowed on those considered to have participated in socially legitimized forms of sport, such as the collegiate level, the competitive secondary level, or other semi-professional and professional levels — which, in practice, discriminate by level of accomplishment.

An insidious form of athletic legitimacy (in my experience) has been through race, where my appearance alone granted me credibility and various privileges in realizing my academic and athletic goals. This is likely due to the stereotypic beliefs that racially Black people have significant physical fortitude and capacities even though race is understood to be a construct.

I feel that being a “Black” collegiate athlete accelerated my acceptance as a “Canadian,” giving me a level of integration into “national pride” and Canadian culture since I had demonstrated my competence through meritocratic competitions. In

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other words, being an athlete is commonly viewed as ambitious, complementary, and productive within society, which tethers your identity to something greater than yourself. Even as a Canadian-born citizen, I would not go so far as to say my sense of national identity would be unchanged without my participation in sport (and I would not dare believe that the sense of belonging I experience as a Canadian would be stronger still had I not participated in sport). This is because sport in Canada is truly sacrosanct and integral to the fabric of our nation. Therefore, I summon at will my proximity to athlete-ship — whether in job interviews, casual conversations, or on dates — to demonstrate my tact, secularity, and collective belonging to this country and society I call home.

I learned just how antithetical identity as a construct can become chaotic as it preordains the privilege of some while disadvantaging others. But this chaos is yet beautiful in that it helps to form a *collective sense of belonging* in people that birth their purpose and passion. In my case, I feel a strong belonging to my ancestral Caribbean culture and Black racial identity, which have given me something to fight for, a story and history I belong to, and with the guidance that this book provides, a consciousness of identity and the future I want to create. (2026)

Seeing Ourselves was originally an in-house publication at Sheridan College for a course I was teaching in 1989 called Human Relations and Cross-Culturalism. I wanted to bring together student essays and comments about race, ethnicity, and citizenship, so that students could “speak” to one another through their own work. I hoped that — through the works and voices of “people like them” — they would come to see that issues of race and ethnic relations were not merely my constructions or those of minoritized peoples. These issues are also the concern of dominant-group members, including many students, who speak eloquently about themselves and issues in racial and ethnic terms. At the time of its publication, immigration from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean had just begun to change the composition of Canada’s population.

The Canadian Multiculturalism Act, formalizing the earlier multiculturalism policy, had been passed a year earlier. The second edition of this book, in 1995, came out at a time when tensions between Canada’s two dominant cultures, English and French, were at the forefront, while increasing attention was also being paid to the status of Indigenous Peoples. The third edition came out in 2003, during the wave of xenophobia and Islamophobia that followed the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States. In 2010, when the fourth edition

was published, the United States was inspiring hope, with the recent inauguration of Barack Obama as the first Black president. Social media were in their infancy, and iPods and BlackBerrys represented the cutting edge of consumer technology.

Now, in 2026, we live with the residues of the COVID-19 pandemic, which created a massive disruption in our lives; the worldwide protests that followed the murder of George Floyd; the resulting proliferation of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives and then the backlash against EDI that has accompanied the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency; and most recently, the wars in Europe (between Ukraine and Russia, which started in 2022) and the Middle East, which started in 2023 and has escalated considerably in 2026. Meanwhile, in recent years, unprecedented numbers of immigrants have entered Canada. Amid it all, the issues that *Seeing Ourselves* aims to address — identity, colonialism, racism, xenophobia, equity, accommodation of difference — persist in relation to these changes in context. Have we made meaningful progress in addressing these issues? Have we expanded the definition of who, without qualification, is “Canadian”?

This book endeavours to provide insight into these questions — perhaps above all, through excerpts from student essays. Many of these essays appeared in the original edition of the book in 1989; others were written for subsequent editions, including this one. And while I did not set out to capture how concepts of race, ethnicity, and citizenship are taken up and articulated by postsecondary students over a period of time, the various editions of this book have done just that, with the essays and comments now covering a thirty-seven-year period. In more recent comments and essays, there is evidence that many of today’s young people have been engaging in conversations about race and ethnic relations as they have been experiencing increasing ethnic and racial diversity in their communities, schools, and workplaces. Some are well acquainted with the growing discourse on whiteness, and the “changing faces” in Canada have served to inform questions about immigration, multiculturalism, and equity. In the case of Richerd and other students, the discourses and discussions relating to these issues were informed, to an extent, by what they gained from this book as a class text — a text whose context took them on a journey by which they came to see themselves and others in new ways, as well as came to an understanding of Canada and to affirm their identities.

Generally, the essays and comments in this book provide critical insights into the thinking and analytical processes of “naïve” or “non-expert” individuals who reflect on issues related to society, community, ethnicity, race, culture, and identity. I have attempted to preserve the voices of collaborators, their analyses, and the ways in which they articulate their ideas. Student excerpts and essays have been reproduced with their permission, though in some cases pseudonyms are used. It is important to remember that these excerpts and essays are individual accounts and, therefore, cannot be generalized to others, not even those of similar racial and ethnic backgrounds. I have also used this book as an occasion to dialogue using newspaper articles and reports of local, national, and international events and issues. My attempt in this volume is, as much as possible, to examine the various dimensions of the issues by engaging the voices and sentiments of individuals through essays, excerpts, and so on and those of communities and the state through media comments and reports and government reports, policies, and legislation.

Further, in terms of complexity, it goes without saying that race, ethnicity, citizenship, and immigrant status are not independent of social class, gender, dis/ability, sexuality, and other such factors. Indeed, these factors are interrelated, and it is difficult to disentangle them and point to a particular factor as operating in any given situation or at one time. But the complex, unstable, and fluid relationships between the factors notwithstanding, the discussion needs to start somewhere, and race or ethnicity — or both — are valuable points at which to enter the discussion and examine the issues.

Ultimately, any discourse that deals with critical theory or antiracism must engage people in working toward social change. This necessarily involves individuals’ self-knowledge and awareness, as well as ongoing critical self-reflection. It also means getting to know others as individuals and in relation to their communities in order to engage in effective social action.

Organization of the Book

The themes upon which our discussion is built are identity in terms of ethnicity and race (within which immigrant/refugee/citizenship status, faith, language, generation, etc. are also taken up); multiculturalism; immigration policies and practices; mechanisms of differentiation (racism, xenophobia, etc.); education and employment equity programs;

and privileges based on identity. *Seeing Ourselves* is informed by a *cultural analysis perspective*, which means that in our attempt to better understand ourselves and one another, we appreciate and respect the experiences of others by understanding how they live, struggle, and exist in the world.

In Chapter 1, I focus on culture and cultural relations. No society is without culture — a core set of values and expectations that exert tremendous influence on our lives, structure our worldviews, shape our behaviours, and pattern our responses. The culture of the society in which we live or the ethnoracial group with which we identify is generally more difficult to detect and analyze than the cultures of others because of how deeply we are immersed in our own culture. Moreover, culture is never static — in the last fifteen years cultures worldwide have been transformed by social media, among other factors. By understanding and being aware of culture, we can begin to understand, appreciate, accommodate, and not be threatened by cultural differences.

Chapter 2 explores issues of identity, centring on the question of who is considered “Canadian.” White Canadians tend to think of themselves as “raceless” and simply “Canadian” without qualification. Black, brown, and other racialized Canadians tend not to have the same privilege and are much more likely to see their Canadian identity mediated by such things as ethnicity, race, accent, language, and other factors which are used in their identity construction. Student narratives indicate the complexity of identity construction, especially for those of mixed race or ethnicity, and highlight the ways in which individuals’ identity constructions are shaped by their experiences in families, communities, and schools.

In Chapter 3, I look at multiculturalism, which is deeply embedded in Canada’s self-concept and legislative framework. The context of multiculturalism has changed as the composition of Canada’s population has changed. Multiculturalism promises that immigrant and racialized Canadians will be able to “maintain” their cultures while fully participating in society and, in the process, benefit from equal opportunities. However, narratives and analyses show that the promise of multiculturalism has been fulfilled only to a limited extent. The ways in which the accommodation of cultural differences are taken up in Québec invite particular consideration.

Immigration, the subject of Chapter 4, was originally designed to ensure that Canada stays a white, Christian, European society. Even after explicit discriminatory policies based on race were removed from

Canadian immigration law in the 1960s, administrative procedures and the lingering effects of past discrimination maintained the subordinate status of immigrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. It is only in recent years that the presence of large numbers of immigrants from these areas has profoundly changed the demographic composition of Canadian society. Comments by young people reveal the misconceptions that underlie many Canadians' attitudes toward immigration. Narratives by longtime Canadian citizens as well as young immigrants and the children of immigrants indicate the ways in which the image of Canada as a welcoming country needs reconsideration.

In Chapter 5, I examine racialization and racism, with emphasis on *systemic racism*. Individuals' experiences with racism, and the values, attitudes, and ideas they express, are not merely a product of their encounters with other individuals but are structured by the prevailing ideologies, ethics, and practices of the institutions and colonial society in which we reside. Racism operates at the individual, institutional, and societal levels to frame the self-identification and experiences of individuals, as well as their perceptions of the possibilities offered to them in Canadian society. Racism — an extension of colonialism — is a belief system that informs the ways in which physical characteristics are used to presuppose people's abilities, skills, and other competences, which in turn structure their participation in society. Racism is related to racialization and stereotyping, among other things, which all intersect with xenophobia, classism, sexism, and so on with the resulting action: discrimination. The narratives shared by young people provide insights into their experiences with racism in education, housing, sports, and the society generally.

In Chapter 6, I reflect on equity, which is treating people *differently* according to their circumstances, and not the *same*, which would be equality. I discuss the extent to which programs that have been instituted for marginalized group members to address their inequitable access to, and participation in, employment and education have been producing the outcomes promised. We have the chance here to see how over time (from the 1990s to 2026), young people who are pursuing the education that would ensure their attainment of desired employment view such programs. Some young people see equity programs, and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives in particular, as making possible opportunities for everyone regardless of background — though at times

there was ambivalence. Others have been resentful. As critics, they argued that such programs are a violation of the “merit principle” and represent “reverse racism” directed against dominant members of society, especially white males. These criticisms are based on the assumption that Canada is a meritocratic, egalitarian, and democratic society. But while this represents reality for some, it does not for many others.

In Chapter 7, I conclude by returning briefly to questions discussed earlier in the book, noting individuals’ acknowledgement of the significance of race and ethnicity in their identification and in relation to the privileges that they do or do not enjoy. In a brief conversation with an educator and selections from students, I show that we need to cultivate an education system and provide the kind of education that enables us to recognize the ways in which inequity operates to privilege some citizens and disadvantage others. We need to get to *know* one another as we get to *know* ourselves, our communities, and the structures that operate to afford us the opportunities and privileges we have or do not have.

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That this book was written is due to the contributions and efforts of several people to whom I owe a tremendous debt. It is appropriate that I start by acknowledging the many students who contributed their essays and excerpts, trusting me enough to share their experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings. To all of them I am sincerely grateful. The various contributions, I am sure, will further debates and discussions of race and ethnic relations, as well as antiracism education and social action.

This edition of *Seeing Ourselves* benefits from the cumulative conversations, feedback, advice, suggestions, assistance, and support I have received from many individuals over the years. For this current edition, the research assistance I received from David Baidoo-Anu, Kai James, Tka Pinnock, and Firrisaa Abdulkarim is much appreciated. I thank David in particular for help with the census data and development of the models and chart, which I hope serve as effective visual resources. This recent research supplements that received for earlier editions from Selom Chapman-Nyaho, Danielle Kwan-Lafond, Krysta Pandolfi, Yasmin Razack, Maxine Wood, Gordon Pon, and Kai James. I remain grateful to you. I must continue to acknowledge and say thanks to Verna Frayne, Lisa Sutcliffe, and Alix Yule of Sheridan College who were there at the initial stage of this project and encouraged me to pursue it — not

knowing then that they/we were initiating a thirty-year project. I remain very appreciative of their support.

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Introduction

Culture and Cultural Relations

If birds were suddenly endowed with scientific curiosity they might examine many things, but the sky itself would be overlooked as a suitable subject; if fish were to become curious about the world, it would never occur to them to begin by investigating water. For birds and fish would take the sky and water for granted, unaware of their profound influence because they comprise the medium for every act. Human beings in a similar way occupy a symbolic universe governed by codes that are unconsciously acquired and automatically employed. So much so that they rarely notice the ways people conduct their affairs in other cultures. (Barnlund 1988, 14)

According to Dean Barnlund, this “cultural myopia” is a common characteristic of the members of every society. As such, each of us, in different ways, has mannerisms, beliefs, values, and activities that are reflective of the cultures of the societies, communities, and groups in which we have grown up, with which we identify, and/or to which we are ascribed — even if we are unaware of displaying the culture or cultures. As Ray McDermott and Hervé Varenne (2006, 26) put it, “People in culture can be made systematically inarticulate about the fundamentals of this culture.” It is important to understand that culture is not static but dynamic and complex, and, as Evelyn Kallen asserts, “The most important part of culture is that it is a learned phenomenon; it is acquired, for the most part, through the ordinary processes of growing up and participating in the daily life of a particular [among others] ethnic collective” (1995, 20).

In this chapter, we explore culture as a *structure* which frames individuals' life experiences and their responses to social and environmental factors, and which individuals help to construct. The objective is to arrive at an understanding of culture — the core set of norms, values, and expectations to which Canadian residents adhere — and to explore how people living in Canada, and in particular communities within Canada, are expected to integrate into a set of cultural values and aspirations.

Anita Jackson and Ferguson Meadows (1991, 72) point out that “for most people the term [culture] is vague because individuals live the culture and seldom explain it or consciously think about or evaluate it.” In all societies, communities, and groups, there is a core set of beliefs, values, and expectations that exert tremendous influence on our lives, structure our worldviews, shape our behaviours, and inform our responses. Peter Adler (1977, 27) asserts,

The ultimate interpretation of human biology is a cultural phenomenon; that is, the meanings of human biological patterns are culturally derived. Though all human beings are born, reproduce, and die, it is culture which dictates the meaning of sexuality, the ceremonials of birth, the transitions of life, and the rituals of death.

In his exploration of the roots, meanings, and uses of the word “culture,” Raymond Williams (1983, 87) writes,

Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought.

Taking this complexity into consideration, and with reference to J.G. Herder's eighteenth-century text *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, Williams also makes the point that it is necessary “to speak of ‘cultures’ in the plural: The specific and variable cultures of different nations and periods, but also the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups within a nation” (89). In this regard, our reference here to culture is not to detract from its complexity and variations in

terms of the activities, relationships, and processes, but to explore its subjective and historical dimension in the ways individuals have come to make sense of culture in their own lives and the lives of others in Canada.

In his discussion of culture, Renato Rosaldo (1993, 26) writes,

Culture lends significance to human experience by selecting from and organizing it. It refers broadly to the forms through which people make sense of their lives, rather than more narrowly to the opera or art museums. It does not inhabit a set-aside domain, as does, for example, that of politics or economics. From the pirouettes of classical ballet to the most brute of brute facts, all human conduct is culturally mediated. Culture encompasses the everyday and the esoteric, the mundane and the elevated, the ridiculous and the sublime. Neither high nor low, culture is all-pervasive.

It is this idea of the “all-pervasiveness” of culture that we wish to emphasize. Culture is not only embedded in everything we do; it is, as Marjorie Kagawa-Singer and Rita Chung (1994, 198) assert, “a tool that defines our reality, worldview and purpose in life.” Moreover, the familial and social groups to which we belong or with which we identify, and the society in which we live (or once lived), not only provide the reference for acceptable behaviours but also sanction those behaviours: “These beliefs, values, and behaviors of culture provide its members with some degree of personal and social meaning for human existence, learned through tradition and transmitted from generation to generation” (198). In discussing the importance of paying attention to the culture or cultural backgrounds of service recipients in a therapy situation, Kagawa-Singer and Chung go on to suggest that human beings have three basic needs for psychological well-being: “1) a sense of safety, 2) sense of self-worth, and 3) sense of belonging”; these are satisfied through the culture of the group with which they identify (199).

Simply put, culture is a concept that refers to the ways in which people in each society, community, or group organize and conduct themselves, and which often serve to distinguish them from members of other societies, communities, or groups. Culture consists of a dynamic and complex set of values, beliefs, norms, patterns of thinking, styles of communication, linguistic expressions, and ways of interpreting and interacting with the world that help people understand and thus survive

their varied circumstances. Therefore, members of any given society, community, or group will not only be influenced or shaped by the culture of their group, community, or society, but they will also shape it.

Culture operates as the “glue” for society. According to Sondra Thiederman (1992, 3),

Culture is informed by the existing laws; regulations of society; and world economic, social, and political structures (e.g., capitalism) and events. Without culture, society would be in disarray. Have you ever wondered, for example, who decided that it is “polite” to say “thank you” after an exchange? Some cultures consider it rude to say “thank you” because it ends what ought to be an infinite flow of give and take. Why do we think it is intrusive when a stranger sits next to us in an empty subway car? In many other countries, it would be regarded as an insult if the person sat elsewhere.

Culture is not defined strictly by artifacts, clothing, or food but by how group members use, interpret, and perceive those artifacts; neither is it a fixed set of customs, languages, and rituals. These are the symbols of a culture, and they too change. Observable aspects of culture are merely surface and, in some ways, tangible reflections of a complex, interconnected set of elements that fulfil specific functions in the lives of the members of that society. Culture is what organizes our everyday lives. It gives us cues as to how we should act in given situations, provides markers for our values, and helps organize our individual lives, families, and communities. It also guides the structure of society and its institutions (government, schools, and so on). In fact, we adhere to particular ways of doing things or the rules of society or group because we place a value on them. We respond to behaviours with disgust, horror, pleasure, or disdain often because we judge them as right or wrong. And while we continually evaluate and reinvent rules, members of society are still sanctioned, punished, or rewarded based on their loyalty to the rules. The result is that people are motivated to abide by society’s rules and to attempt to force others to do so.

While cultural rules are decided on informally, they carry immense value and influence our behaviour and ideas. For example, our automatic tendency to hold the door open for someone or to say “good morning” are actions that are culturally influenced. And many of these practices,

ideas, and assumptions are not part of our consciousness; they are often invisible and taken for granted. Michael Schwalbe (2005, 19) explains one way in which culture can be created:

Someone finds a solution to a problem, other people see that it works and adopt it, and eventually the solution becomes “what everyone does.” For a time people remember the idea behind the practice, but then, after a while, they forget. “This is just how we do things,” they begin to say. When children come along they are taught the practice as a matter of course, perhaps with little explanation of the ideas on which it was originally based. It is as if the practice — the behavior that solves the problem — becomes part of a sediment that constitutes culture.

Simple actions such as boarding a bus; walking up the escalator, as we drive, on the right side; being “on time”; dropping by to see a friend; and attending classes are aspects of culture. These behaviours are governed by the shared assumptions and rules of the culture. The commonality of these values makes it possible to predict and control behaviour. For example, teachers and students with similar social histories or from the same community are likely to know what to expect from one another on the basis of commonly understood rules about schooling. Although raising your hand in class or a group, if you wish to speak, is a common practice, it is also acceptable, particularly among older students and adults, not to do so. But we understand that while raising our hand is not always required, there are still assumptions about when it is appropriate to interrupt a discussion and when we should wait. We routinely operate on the assumption that all of us know the rules and conduct ourselves accordingly. This enables us to depend on one another to behave in predictable ways.

People arriving in a new society — or entering a new group — immediately identify the cultural ideas, values, customs, traditions, and practices in which people function and operate. These are often clearer to someone from the outside because we are so immersed in our culture that we tend not to recognize its influence. It is understandable how and why we would take culture for granted, even as it greatly informs our routine activities and everyday practices. For example, it doesn’t seem odd to us to see someone walking on the street or sitting on a bus apparently talking into the air, because we understand that the individual is speaking on a

mobile phone. Imagine someone coming from elsewhere who had no experience with such devices. The point is, our behaviours are part of our everyday existence, and we never stop to think of them as unusual, weird, or strange — they are things we accept.

This tendency for a culture to be imperceptible to people within it is evident in the following comments, which represent what happens when some “Canadians” are questioned about their taken-for-granted identity or “culturelessness.” In some cases, they experience feelings of difficulty in trying to reconcile, rethink, or broaden their understandings.

Andrea: Call me naive, ignorant, or sheltered from the real world, but I thought in order to have a culture a person had to be of a different racial group. Since I was born in Canada, I thought I was just “Canadian.” Now I am told I have a culture. (1989)

Richie: As far as my culture goes, I am at a loss. I am Canadian. Period. There are no special traditions or attitudes that have been passed on to me by my parents or grandparents. My parents have taught me what they think is important for me to know. I have no traditional food or drink, no cultural costume. I am Canadian. (1989)

Andrea and Richie’s comments illustrate the feelings of many white Canadians, who, when asked to identify themselves, think that saying “Canadian” suffices, and they usually insist they have no “culture.” These individuals think that Canada is “culturally neutral” and that racialized (i.e., non-white) people — especially people from elsewhere and even those who have been living here for generations — are the ones who have culture and maintain it. This is why even after years of living in Canada, immigrant and racialized Canadians — or, to use the uniquely Canadian term from years ago, “visible minorities” — tend not to have the privilege of identifying themselves simply as “Canadian.” When they do, they are usually asked, “Where are your parents from?” and then, “Where are your grandparents from?” As one white student explained to me, he would not accept that single descriptor, “Canadian,” from a Black or Chinese person because “they do not look Canadian.” Is it any wonder that Canadians who are not white claim, or resort to, a national identity related to their ethnic origin, country of birth, or ancestor’s country or region of birth?

The assumption of “neutrality,” or “absence” of the culture into which we are socialized, helps to obscure the strangeness of the things

we do and accept as normal — like our everyday rituals, practices, assumptions, and behaviours. These taken-for-granted things are nicely satirized in Horace Miner's creative masterpiece "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema" (1956). Miner wrote of the cultural practices of "a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles" (503). In presenting the Nacirema as a "foreign" culture or group even when he is speaking of one that is immensely familiar, Miner gives readers a glimpse into the kinds of practices we engage in and understand and the norms we take for granted. According to Miner, some of the main routines of the Nacirema are, for example, the "private mouth rite" (teeth-brushing) and a wall shrine (medicine cabinet) that houses "many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live"; the most powerful of these items are prepared and provided by "medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded with substantial gifts" (1956, 504). Discernibly, "Nacirema" is "American" spelled backwards.

Similar practices and ideas exist among people in almost every part of the world. This speaks to the universality of many cultural forms, practices, and ideas. Not be overlooked is the significant role of spirituality: its various forms and expressions in different societies serve to inform the interests, desires, and behaviours of people in much the same way. Music, taking on varied forms such as opera, ragas, reggae, jazz, and hip-hop, is also shared in many societies and communities. Essentially, as individuals, we each have habits, routines, and ways of doing things that might seem unique to us, but these are derived from and informed by various historical and contemporary structures and measures as much as by characteristics such as ethnicity, social class, dis/ability, language, race, age, occupation, sex, and religion.

Cultural Diversity: Differences among Ethnoracial Groups

Every society is culturally diverse insofar as differences based on language, ethnicity, religion, race, or region exist among its people. And since individuals are members of a number of different cultural groups (in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, language, etc.), they possess a combination of values, customs, and patterns of thinking derived from the culture of the society in which they live as well as from the many

groups to which they belong. Also, the geography of a country — from physical region to neighbourhood, as well as rural versus urban versus suburban versus exurban — plays a significant role in the cultures that exist in its societies. Geographical areas, with their particular resources, structure the cultures that develop among residents. For instance, the ocean surrounding Newfoundland, the oil sands of Alberta, and the forests and mountains of British Columbia all contribute to the social, recreational, and other activities of provincial residents and hence, the cultural variations among Canadians.

In the context of Canadian society, the official policy of multiculturalism (discussed in detail in Chapter 3) structures a discourse of the country as “multicultural,” promoting the idea that cultural freedom and equality of opportunity exist for everyone, and people are permitted to maintain the particularities of their ethnic culture. Furthermore, culture is used as the basis for defining diversity and difference, specifically regarding the racial, ethnic, immigrant, linguistic, and religious backgrounds of Canadians. As such, there is a reliance on the observable and ascribed characteristics of culture, particularly for minoritized and racialized Canadians, in constructing, understanding, and naming their differences. And while race or skin colour, specifically being “not white,” is employed in the identification of individuals as different (as with the term “visible minority”), the multicultural discourse conveys the notion that it is not race per se — that is, the physical characteristics of the body — that is used as identification, but the culture of individuals or group members.

Framing culture in terms of difference and diversity in terms of different “cultural groups” has the effect of rendering invisible or immaterial the ways in which race or colour — and discrimination — operate to inform the cultural values, attitudes, and expressions toward Indigenous, racialized, and immigrant Canadians and Canadians in general. Saying that someone has culture because they are “culturally” different tends to be done based on race, colour, ethnicity, accent, language, or name. The use of the word “different” implies a norm that begs the question: different from what? Clifford Jansen (2005, 21) identifies the problem with using culture as a marker for difference by posing the following questions: “What exactly constitutes a cultural group? What are the boundaries that separate one culture from another? To what extent are cultures the ‘creation’ of persons or groups from outside of the so-called culture?”

A “subculture,” or what I refer to as “group culture,” is “a group of people within a larger socio-political structure who share cultural (and often linguistic or dialectical) characteristics which are distinctive enough to distinguish it from others within the same culture” (Hoopes and Pusch 1979, 3). The elements of group cultures that find expression in the society sometimes conflict with the “culture (i.e. norms, values, expectations etc.) of the society” as a whole. However, as already mentioned, no culture is static. Variations in cultural expressions within a society exist because of social and historical factors that preserve and generate differences. The region, gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, and sex with which people identify are factors that help to determine the variation in group cultures. For instance, although individuals may share the belief that formal education is related to future career success, their understandings of career success may differ depending on the norms, values, and expectations of their cultural groups. This would then determine the kind and level of education they pursue and the activities in which they engage.

The cultures of minoritized groups cannot be considered in a reductionist way or as a subset of what can be considered the dominant culture. Even though individuals may be members of particular ethnic and racial groups, they will not share in all the beliefs and practices of the group. While we are often presented with the image of subcultures or group cultures as unified wholes, the families and individuals identified as part of such groups should not be expected to think and act in similar ways, because social class, family composition, citizenship status, years of residency in a country, and a host of other factors all contribute to the differences among group members. In this sense, it is important to understand that cultures cannot be conceptualized as unified systems of meanings, but rather as dynamic, diverging, coalescing, inconsistent, combining, and full of contending discourses, all of which are mediated, in part, by institutional and societal structures and ultimately where power resides. Paying attention to power relations is critical to our understanding of culture. Power relations also inform an individual’s sense of self, cultural meaning, and the ways they understand who and what they are in the world.

Accordingly, contrary to the multiculturalism discourse of Canada, cultural differences among immigrants and minoritized Canadians are not merely a product of their desire to “maintain” their cultures. In this regard, the claim that ethnic-group members’ ancestral homeland

cultures (with a presumption that they are immigrants) have been maintained is misguided. Such claims negate the fact that the culture of Portuguese ethnic-group members living in Toronto, for instance, are different from those living in mainland Portugal or the Azores. A good test of this idea would be to ask a Portuguese person or any other immigrant or racialized Canadian about their trip back “home.” They would likely report that in addition to changes in language and accents, the place to which they felt an affinity is different — it is no longer a place with which the Canadian or hyphenated Canadian can fully identify (see Maciel Jorge 2024). And that is how it should be, given the changes to culture over time and generations. The notion of static and identifiable cultural norms remaining constant across time and geographical spaces contradicts the idea of such changes.

That the cultural practices, values, and customs of the Italian, Somali, Scottish, Jamaican, Portuguese, Chinese, and South Asian group members in Canada differ from those in the countries in which they constitute the dominant group also has to do with the fact that they are influenced by the “invisible” Canadian culture. Furthermore, agents of socialization such as family, school, work, and peer groups operate to ensure that individuals acquire what they need to function in the society with a minimum of disruption to the established social, cultural, economic, and political structures. So, while all immigrants and minoritized ethnic group members do at varying levels conform to the prevailing norms, values, and expectations of the society, there are differences or variations based on their population size, history,¹ perceived role in the building of Canada, and level of commitment toward maintaining their ancestral culture. In cases where a group’s cultural practices are not in conflict with the dominant cultural norms and values of the society, the group’s cultural norms, values, and related practices may persist over time, and eventually elements of them will become absorbed into mainstream Canadian culture. But where values and practices conflict with prevailing cultural norms in the society, depending on the outcome of conformity pressures to change and “fit in,” new cultural norms, values, and practices will emerge. This can be seen clearly in the case of practices such as traditional methods of disciplining a child or having multiple spouses.²

While it is important to recognize the differences among ethnoracial groups, it is also important to avoid the trap of essentializing group members based on group affiliation. Indeed, as Seyla Benhabib (2002,

102) argues in her book *The Claims of Culture: Equity and Diversity in the Global Era*, cultures are not “unified, harmonious, seamless wholes that speak with one narrative voice.” Using ethnocultural background to account for, or contextualize, the actions of individuals can have the effect of imprisoning individuals “in a cage of univocal cultural interpretations and psychological motivations,” reducing their intentions to “cultural stereotypes” and their “moral agency to cultural puppetry” (89). The tendency of community leaders — as well as outsiders, such as politicians, policymakers, educators, and community workers — to promote and maintain a uniform construction of minoritized and racialized groups and their cultures is partly a result of their desire to “comprehend, search for the truth, and maintain social control” (103). As well, the practice of homogenizing ethnoracial minority groups and their cultures has the effect of silencing “dissenting opinions and contradictory perspectives” and produces a “dominant master narrative of what the cultural tradition is, who is in, and who is out” (194).

In any society, the cultures of the different immigrant, ethnic, and racial groups — whether deliberately through accommodation or naturally through organic change — inevitably merge at some point. Cultures cannot be totally distinct. The culture of African or Black people in Toronto cannot be distinctly different from that of European or white people as there are places where the two merge and we see similarities. All groups need to find ways to negotiate and survive the economic and political contexts in which we all live. Black people will likely respond to economic, social, and environmental crises in many of the same ways as white people. However, Black people will also likely have to deal with racism and discrimination, adding another layer to how they may respond. Therefore, while there are similarities and commonalities, there are also key differences that must be taken into account. By paying attention to differences and how such differences contribute to the culture that emerges, we can understand cultural variations that exist in society.

Canadian Culture Continually Evolves

If we think back to the culture of 2010 — when smartphones and social media were in their infancy, before Instagram and TikTok and before artificial intelligence (AI) — it is easy to see how much our culture has changed in such a short time. Today, we are operating in a cultural context that is technologically and digitally mediated. By 2023, a majority

of the world's people owned smartphones. Instead of hailing taxis, people use ridesharing apps like Uber and Lyft on their phones. In their cars, a disembodied voice guides them to their destination; unfolding maps and asking for directions are forgotten activities. They pay restaurant bills with a flick of an Apple Watch. Spotify has displaced CDs, just as CDs displaced cassette tapes and vinyl records.

As culture evolves, we grow accustomed to changes, rarely taking note of them — we are caught up in them, and they become normal to us. They are changes in which we engage and to which we contribute — such as expansion of civil and women's rights and advances in art, music, design, and architecture. Consider the changes in our culture around environmental issues; not so long ago, people who recycled, composted, and refused plastic bags were considered unusual; now in major cities across Canada, such practices are required. Cannabis was bought and sold clandestinely on street corners; now there is hardly a mall or commercial strip without a cannabis store. On the other hand, while people once smoked tobacco openly at work or at social gatherings, now it is increasingly difficult in Canada to find a place to smoke legally.

Similarly, our attitudes toward sex, gender, and sexuality have changed radically in this generation. In 2005, Canada became the fourth country in the world to grant full legal recognition to same-sex marriage, preceded by the Netherlands (2001), Belgium (2003), and Spain (2005). By 2025, the number of countries where same-sex marriage was legally recognized had risen to thirty-eight. It is no longer strange to hear a man refer to his husband or a woman refer to her wife. Meanwhile, an understanding of gender identity as separate from — and not always corresponding to — biological sex at birth has become more common. “Gender identity or expression” was added to the prohibited grounds of discrimination in the Canadian Human Rights Act in 2017. People routinely specify their pronouns to avoid being misgendered. Even mainstream media outlets use “they” as a singular pronoun to refer to nonbinary people. But acceptance of gender diversity and nonconformity is far from universal. Indeed, in every society, community, or group there are bound to be variations in terms of what is perceived as acceptable. Under conservative provincial governments, Saskatchewan and Alberta have passed legislation requiring parental consent for students to change their names and pronouns in school. Alberta has also barred transgender athletes from competing in women's sports, limited sex education,

and prohibited gender-affirming medical treatment for minors, while invoking the notwithstanding clause to prevent legal challenges under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Changes in cultures are influenced not only by local and national events but also by world events. We are well aware of how the COVID-19 pandemic changed people's lives the world over. The economic impact has been absorbed, but perhaps the most profound effects have been cultural and psychological. Many schoolchildren have still not recovered from the disruption of their education during the peak pandemic years. Young adults who were in university during the pandemic missed the richness of campus life (C.E. James 2025). And those whom Canadian poet Philip Resnick (2021, 39) calls "the lucky generation," who grew up after World War II "spared the wars, the dole, / the diseases, the back-breaking toil" of previous generations, have been forced to recognize the wisdom of the ancient Greek precept: "Do not count yourself fortunate until your final day." Some of the artifacts of the pandemic have lingered as well. Most people have abandoned their masks, but some still wear them. And even as in-person gatherings and return to workplaces resumed, people continued to conduct business meetings, university classes, religious services, and family reunions online or as hybrid events. Meanwhile, wildfires that occur every summer and send their smoke all over North America remind us that climate change is more of a threat than ever, even as political leaders' attention has moved to other issues.

The election in 2008 of Barack Obama, widely acclaimed as the "first Black president of the United States," served to change the discourse on race in the United States and became a testament to the American Dream — that anything is possible if you work hard enough for it. The idea that a Black man could become president of the United States would have us believe that race no longer matters and that everyone has opportunities irrespective of race. However, Obama's eight-year presidency was followed by the election of Donald Trump, who not only criticized and disparaged Obama's time as president but also promoted, and embodied, a more exclusive, imperial vision of America. One of Trump's signature initiatives after he returned to office in January 2025 was an all-out attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, not only in the federal government but also in universities, corporations, and other institutions. As well, he has positioned the United States as the ruler of the Western Hemisphere and proposed that Canada become its 51st state.

In Canada, when newly elected Prime Minister Justin Trudeau introduced his “gender-balanced” Cabinet on November 4, 2015, he responded to a reporter’s question about it with “Because it’s 2015.” Indeed, it seemed that something had changed: with equal numbers of men and women and increased representation from the country’s non-European communities, the Cabinet appeared to reflect a new sense of what Canada is about. The implicit message was that we have evolved to a culture in which gender and race are no longer barriers to success. Underlying this message is the notion of meritocracy, which reassures members of presumed democratic societies that it is through individual efforts, hard work, and determination that their successes will be realized (individualism). Gender balance and ethnic and racial diversity continued to be characteristics of Canadian cabinets through Trudeau’s decade in office and into the term of his successor, Mark Carney, reinforcing the message that equity is a foundation of today’s culture. Whether this message reflects reality or whether it is deceptive is a question individuals will answer as they read this book.

It is worth taking note of Carney’s famous speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, almost a year (January 20, 2026) after becoming prime minister:

For decades, countries like Canada prospered under what we called the rules-based international order. We joined its institutions, we praised its principles, we benefited from its predictability. And because of that, we could pursue values-based foreign policies under its protection.... We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition. Over the past two decades, a series of crises in finance, health, energy and geopolitics have laid bare the risks of extreme global integration. But more recently, great powers have begun using economic integration as weapons, tariffs as leverage, financial infrastructure as coercion, supply chains as vulnerabilities to be exploited.... Canada has what the world wants. We are an energy superpower. We hold vast reserves of critical minerals. We have the most educated population in the world.... We have capital.

Yet, at the United Nations General Assembly (on March 25, 2026) when a Ghanaian-sponsored (not legally binding) resolution was brought forward asking for recognition of the trafficking of enslaved Africans and

calling on UN member states to consider apologizing “and contributing to a reparations fund.” Canada — a sponsor of the UN Second decade of *International Decade for People of African Descent* — was one of fifty-two nation states that abstained (123 voted in favour, and three — the US, Israel, and Argentina — voted against). Fernando Duarte expressed concern, asserting that the transatlantic slave trade was “the gravest crime against humanity.”³

Canadian Mainstream Culture

In asserting that “mainstream Canadian culture is different from other mainstream cultures but remains strongly rooted in a distinctive Western culture,” Philip Carl Salzman (2017) referenced Prime Minister Justin Trudeau telling the *New York Times* (Lawson 2015) that “there is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada. There are shared values — openness, respect, compassion, willingness to work hard, to be there for each other, to search for equality and justice. Those qualities are what make us the first postnational state.” Salzman goes on to say,

These statements that Canada, or English Canada, has no mainstream culture are political statements, presumably intended to make political points, but how accurate are they in describing social reality in Canada? ... It is almost without dispute that there is a mainstream culture in every society. There has to be a mainstream culture, in order for people to know what to expect, and what is expected, and to get along with one another in practical, day to day encounters and relationships. First, there must be a common means of communication, a common language or languages, without which social life is impossible. That is why Pierre Trudeau declared that Canadian multiculturalism would exist within a bilingual society with only English and French as official languages, and no others.

The fact is, as colonizers of Indigenous territory — Turtle Island — the British and French established a colony structured largely on their beliefs, morals, laws, and traditions. But the cultures of Indigenous Peoples informed the mainstream culture that evolved — if merely through the institutions the British and French were able to generate and what they learned from Indigenous Peoples so that they might live and realize their economic objectives (in part, by enslaving Indigenous

Peoples and afterwards bringing enslaved Africans). In addition, the cultures of ethnic and racialized groups with whom the British and French “share the physical environment and the territory they inhabit” (Adler 1977, 26) — even as they are different from the dominant group culture — contribute to the societal culture that emerges.

Despite the European origins of what we understand as Canadian culture, the mainstream culture is not based entirely on one particular group. The dominance of the culture of English ethnic-group Canadians in provinces except Québec has been maintained through pacification of minoritized groups in response to their demands, contestation, and struggle for rights, justice, and recognition. Furthermore, insofar as culture is dynamic and not enclosed, whatever *mainstream* culture exists in any society emerges from the existence, traditions, practices, ideas, and contributions of *everyone* in that society. It cannot be otherwise, since residents of a society living in the same space and being subjected to the same legal-political structure must negotiate an accommodation of their cultural diversity, differences, and expressions, thereby producing relative stability within the society. Essentially, then, the culture of any society or community results from the contributions and ideas of everyone in that society. Living “in the shadow of the United States of America, 10 times larger in population and economy, vastly more powerful militarily,” and engaged in cross-border cultural, recreational, and educational activities, also contributes to Canada’s mainstream culture (Salzman 2017). And Krueger (n.d.) writes, “In its broadest sense, Canadian culture is a mixture of British, French, and American influences, all of which blend and sometimes compete in every aspect of cultural life, from filmmaking and writing to cooking and playing sports.”

Culture: The Dynamic, Complex, and Sustaining Glue

Canadian culture is a complex combination of the values, symbols, expressions, and so on of all ethnoracial groups. Cultural attributes are both visible and invisible, and they become a part of our existence, often seeping into our everyday lives with little or no conscious effort. For instance, Indigenous artifacts and symbols (e.g., Inuit soapstone art) are generally taken to be Canadian. And it is common to see people wearing green on St. Patrick’s Day, to hear the evening news anchor say “Gong hei fat choy” in recognition of Chinese New Year, to see Hanukkah menorahs in public areas alongside Christmas trees, and to observe Black History

Month celebrations in schools, workplaces, and communities.⁴ And we cannot ignore the real effects that climate change is continuing to have on our culture. Already we are seeing how earthquakes, hurricanes, wildfires, ice and snowstorms, life-threatening heat, and other climate-related factors are affecting cultures — not only elsewhere but in Canada as well. We must recognize that we live an interrelated global existence.

Notes

- 1 For example, the colonization of Indigenous Peoples, particularly through forced residential schooling; the enslavement of African peoples; the internment of Japanese people during the war; the head tax charged to Chinese immigrants; and continuous journey legislation applied to South Asians. The ways in which such groups understand their history in this country influence the ways in which they come to understand, negotiate, and feel a sense of belonging in Canada. See Chapters 4 and 5 for more detail on these topics.
- 2 Referred to as polygamous marriage, the practice has been illegal in Canada since 1892. Hence, faith and/or ethnic groups with traditions of polygamy are expected to practise monogamy.
- 3 Fernando Duarte (2026) writes, “In welcoming the vote, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that the wealth of many Western nations was ‘built on stolen lives and stolen labour.’ And elaborating on this call for social justice, Duarte adds that “reparations are intended to work as a restitution — an apology and repayment to black people whose ancestors were forced into slavery.”
- 4 Following earlier provincial and municipal recognition, celebration of Black History Month was established at the federal level in 1996 when the House of Commons unanimously adopted a motion by Hon. Jean Augustine, then a member of Parliament from Ontario and Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister (see Smardz Frost 2006, 17). Of course, the celebration takes different forms in different regions and communities in the country depending on a number of factors, not least the existence of an African Canadian community in that area.